

Remarks Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel
and an Exchange With Reporters
March 20, 2001

President Bush. It's my honor to welcome the Prime Minister of our close friend and ally to the Oval Office. Mr. Prime Minister, welcome.

We've just had a very frank and good discussion. Both of us reconfirmed our friendship, both talked about how best to keep the peace.

I assured the Prime Minister my administration will work hard to lay the foundation of peace in the Middle—work with our nations in the Middle East, give peace a chance. Secondly, I told him that our Nation will not try to force peace, that we will facilitate peace, and that we will work with those responsible for peace.

The Prime Minister and I had met before. I took a tour of the West Bank by helicopter, and he was the guide. It was a pretty interesting—it was a really interesting day for me. He's got a marvelous sense of history, and I learned a lot about our friend by touring the West Bank by chopper with you, Mr. Prime Minister.

You didn't think you were going to be the Prime Minister, and you probably darn sure didn't think I was going to be the President. But here we are, and we've got great responsibilities to work together, and I look forward to doing so.

Welcome, Mr. Prime Minister. Glad you're here.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you. I would like to thank you, President Bush, for inviting me to the White House. We've had a very constructive and frank discussion of strategic issues that are of the interest of the United States and Israel. And we discussed the peace process, what can be achieved, and how. We are, in Israel, we are all committed to peace. As one who saw in the past all the horrors of wars, I believe I understand the import of peace. And in Israel, all of us are committed.

But of course, the first thing and the most important one is to bring security to the citizens of Israel. That was the commitment that I took upon myself, Mr. President, and that is the first thing that we have to accomplish. Once we reach security, and it will be calm in the Middle East, I believe that we will start with our negotiations to reach a peace agreement.

We shared issues of common interest, and I think it was a very good conversation, a very frank one, and I think that we can look forward—can look ahead, how to achieve our common goals in the Middle East, together with deep cooperation and coordination.

And I would like you for your friendship to Israel. We have friends here, and you have friends there in Israel, which is a democratic country, a stable democracy which appreciate the values of democratic life. I'm sure that we can do many things together. And I would like to thank you for the cooperation of your government, of your own, for our future interests in the Middle East.

President Bush. Thank you, sir.

Jerusalem

Q. Mr. President, the Prime Minister last night expressed his faith in Jerusalem as Israel's eternal, undivided capital, under Israel sovereignty. Mindful of your campaign statements, how do you feel about this statement? Is that something that has U.S. support?

President Bush. Well, the status of Israel, I mean, the status of Jerusalem will be ultimately determined by the interested parties. During the campaign, I said we'll begin the process of moving our Embassy to Jerusalem.

National Economy

Q. Mr. President, yesterday you said that you were very confident about the U.S. economy. Today you said that it's slowing down. Which is it? Are you trying to have it both ways?

President Bush. I was talking about the long-term health of our economy is going to be very strong. And that's in Israel's interest, that our economy be strong. We've got some problems, some short-term problems, and if Congress were to act quickly on my tax stimulus package, it would make our recovery quicker.

Q. Is there any reason to believe that it will help in the short term?

President Bush. Oh, I think it will, and I think good fiscal policy and good monetary policy, good trade policy will help our economy. And we need an energy policy, too. But I hope the Congress acts quickly on a stimulus package that will improve our economy. People have got to know that I have got great faith in the American economy.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat

Q. Mr. President, do you accept the idea not to invite Yasser Arafat, or are you going to invite him and meet with him here?

President Bush. Well, one of the things that the Prime Minister and I talked about is our engagement in the Middle East. I will do everything we can to help calm nerves, to encourage there to be dialog in a peaceful way. I haven't made up my plans on who I'm going to meet with yet. I do have some plans in place. I'm looking forward to meeting the King of Jordan, for example.

But one of the things that I will do is use whatever persuasive powers I have to create an environment in which peace can flourish. I've got great confidence in the Prime Minister, and so do the Israeli people. He got 66 percent of the vote. He did a little better at the polls than I did.

[Laughter] You know what I mean, Mr. Prime Minister.

Future Middle East Negotiations

Q. Prime Minister Sharon, did you manage to convince the President Bush that you will not negotiate under fire? Do you think that this message is clear, and do you think that President Bush agrees with you about this issue?

Prime Minister Sharon. I didn't have to talk to President Bush about that. I think what I understand the policy of this great democracy, the United States, is that one should not surrender to terror and pressure and violence. And therefore, I don't have to work too hard on this thing. I even didn't try.

But I understand, and I believe that they do, and I appreciate that respect that—to that approach that one should never surrender to terror and that the free world should struggle against terror, local, regional, and international terror. And I'm sure that the United States leads such a struggle, and we are a partner in the struggle. I think that is in the interest of every democratic state, because in order to keep stability—and I'm a great supporter of the President's policy of keeping stability in the Middle East—the main danger to stability is terror. And that, I believe, will be—should be the common goal of every democratic country in the free world.

Q. Do you think that Arafat is the danger for the stability in the Middle East, Mr. Sharon?

Prime Minister Sharon. I don't think that I have to add about Arafat. Everyone knows what are the steps of terror and who is behind the steps. I don't think I have to add anything about that. It's clear.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to King Abdullah II of Jordan. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.